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# Inclusion in the Early Childhood Classroom: What Should This Look Like?

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Inclusion in the Early Childhood Classroom-  
What Should This Look Like?  
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### **Abstract**

Inclusion is a topic that affects both general education and special education teachers, all students, all schools and all districts. Inclusive education has been done many ways. This history of inclusion has been a long and ever changing. This article will look at what has studied thus far about inclusion along with research done surrounding inclusion in the early childhood setting. After looking at many options, this article will pinpoint what ways inclusion can be used to support students with disabilities.

## Inclusion in the Early Childhood Classroom - What Should This Look Like?

Imagine a classroom of preschool children playing in centers and learning through play. Students are talking, working together, learning social skills and language skills. Three and four year olds are in centers talking, working through social situations and learning throughout what seems like every day experiences in a preschool classroom. Every child should be able to have the experience that was just described. Some three and four year old children with disabilities are not experiencing preschool in this way.

In many parts of the country and even world, there are preschool students that are in classrooms that serve only children with special needs. These children will sometimes be low functioning or have a tendency to have unexpected behaviors due to their disability. These children should have the opportunity to work alongside students who have skills with disabilities are often lacking. Children who struggle to learn skills should not be denied of peers with these said skills. Peer influence can have an impact on a child's education and should be an element of the educational program that special needs students attend.

Educators need to think about what the optimal environment to encourage growth and learning for preschoolers with special needs. When looking at what helps students to learn and grow schools should contemplate the components of the setting. For instance, educators should think about removal from the room or a push in model. Removal from the general education setting to receive services requires a break in the learning that could take place if a push in type model of services was provided to students. By allowing students to stay and work alongside their peers while also

receiving specially designed instruction is possible. Also thinking about who will deliver the specially designed instruction to students with special needs. Another area that needs to be considered is where this instruction will take place. This literature review will look at all these options to see what environment or level of inclusion helps students to be the most successful.

### **Literature Review**

Inclusion is a topic often discussed in the education setting and many thoughts are shared by educators about what this looks like in the classroom. In an early childhood classroom this is no different. There are many opinions about what is the best way to include children with special needs into an early childhood classroom. This literature review will look at research that has explored inclusion in general as well as in the early childhood setting. The researcher will look at the history of inclusion as well as opposing viewpoints or conflicts, the impact of inclusion on students, teachers and/or school districts. This literature review will seek to find areas for future research and legislation in the area of special education.

### **History**

Inclusion is not a new topic in education but it has changed drastically throughout the years and it will continue to change. The history of education for students with disabilities in the United States has, until relatively recently, been marked by exclusion, not inclusion (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). In 1975, Public Law 94-142 established education for handicapped children, including least restrictive environment (LRE). When this law was instated, there were many thoughts about the definition of LRE. Prior to this law, many students with disabilities were served in separate schools or

were inadequately served within a public school. Douvanis and Hulse (2002) explain that in 1972, there were eight million children with disabilities in the United States, and fully one-half were receiving no educational services. Students were being evaluated for suspected disabilities without notice to parents or due process; parents were able to exclude their children from compulsory attendance regulations; and many children with disabilities who were in schools were being excluded from any meaningful educational services (Hulse, 2002).

Prior to the Public Law 94-142 many children's essential needs were being met in institutions but there was no teaching happening. Some professionals saw that these children could be taught and have a better life. After Public Law 94-142 was established more children with disabilities were served through public education and they received more appropriate services within those schools. Therefore, what pushed this historic act to be passed by congress in 1975? There was a huge push of parental activist in the 1960's and 1970's, as well as court cases in which children with disabilities were denied education within the public school systems in our nation. Both the court cases as well as the activating by parents led Congress to develop Public Law 94-142. This law began the movement of inclusion in public schools.

Since the creation of the Education for all Children Act, more students with disabilities have been served in the LRE. In 1990, the Education for all Children Act became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This included changing the language from handicapped individuals to individuals with disabilities. Dudley-Marling and Burns (2014) found that as of 2008, over 57% of students with disabilities spent at least 80% of their school day inside regular classrooms while just over 5%

were completely excluded from regular school placements (31st Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2009). The impact of these laws on the education system had an immense effect on the way in which children with disabilities were educated and included within the school systems.

### **Underlying Theoretical Frameworks**

The research for this review will focus on the different ways inclusion can look or is set up within various preschool settings. Many schools and communities in the United States are just beginning to provide families with more and better options for inclusive community-based settings (DeVore & Russell, 2007). There are early learning centers that work on full inclusion. This may mean that one teacher that has early childhood education and special education degree serves an array of students in one classroom. Another way to serve special needs students in the general education setting could be met by two teachers: one preschool teacher with early childhood degree and one early childhood special education teacher. The special education teacher and the general education teacher would team-teach one classroom together. Others have a special education teacher come into the general education setting to work with students with disabilities but that teacher would not be there all day or maybe not even every day. Another option that has been used is to have that child leave the general education classroom to go work with a special education teacher in a separate room for so many minutes a day or week.

The researcher investigates why inclusion appears different by reviewing professional ideals and philosophies and how professional practices affect inclusion

occurring in the educational settings. There are a variety of thoughts and beliefs on the topic of inclusion. Many see inclusion as a civil right while others see it as from a deficit perspective. Those who feel it is a civil rights issue believe that inclusion has more to do with including all individuals because we are all human and all have the right to belong. Vakil, Welton, O'Conner and Kline (2008) stated the following about inclusion:

Those early childhood educators who include all children promote a climate that increases sensitivity and acceptance of diversity while decreasing teasing and bullying based upon physical or ability differences. Inclusive early childhood educators recognize the wide range of abilities and learning needs of the children in their classroom (p. 326).

The deficit perspective looks at how far behind some children with disabilities may be when compared to their typical peers in a variety of skill areas. From a deficit perspective, the overarching goal of special education is to provide students with the skills needed to function normally in a normal environment (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). This type of belief allows educators to make a case that having this child separated will provide more one on one time so that these skills can be gained. Different perspectives and beliefs among educators are shaping the education of all students, but especially students with special needs are receiving.

There are barriers to inclusion within the education community. These barriers can affect how effectively we are able to educate our young students with special needs. When educators and administrators have mixed feelings or are opposed to inclusion, this can be a barrier. The strongest facilitator of inclusion across all programs in our sample was key personnel. The people who were instrumental varied ranging



from teacher to the superintendent of a district's school (Lieber, Hanson, Beckman, & Odom, 2000). Their philosophy and beliefs about inclusion and how to best serve the needs of students with disabilities has a huge impact on the success of inclusion. The education professions must also be qualified personal to deliver instruction to students with special needs especially in early childhood. In order to serve preschool children with special needs, it is required for the educator to have an early childhood special education teaching degree; however, an educator with a special education degree for K-5 Elementary is not qualified.

Collaboration and communication between education professionals so that they can discuss what is best for students and have a plan for how to best meet those needs. The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms necessitates collaboration between administrators, general educators, special educators, parents, and related service providers in order to deliver quality services to all students (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010). Willingness to change is another factor and possible barrier to inclusion. If there are community members, district representatives, educators and paraprofessionals who are unwilling to make changes so that students can be better served this will affect inclusion. When colleagues find a shared vision it will allow inclusion to be a much smoother process, but finding a shared vision will not happen without some change. Many factors can be barriers to inclusion and these will be addressed throughout the literature review.

Lastly, the researcher will look at the many different ways inclusion has been presented in the articles that were reviewed. Then state what is believed to be best practice when looking at inclusion in preschool. Inclusion can be done many ways in

early childhood settings. The pros and cons will be reviewed as well as the research surrounding each method. The researcher will conclude the article by looking at the future and what will be the best way to educate preschool students with disabilities.

### **Themes in the Literature**

Several themes were found when reviewing the literature collected. The underlying theme of professional philosophies and how they play a role in inclusion will be examined. This review will look at the benefits of inclusion in general as well as the inclusion of preschool students with disabilities. The articles explored the growth that was made by these children and the rate that it was being made. Social emotional growth was also investigated in the articles as well. Another underlying theme found in the articles that were reviewed was the impact that inclusion had on students, teachers and school districts. The process and amount of work put in at the education settings that were implementing inclusion was also targeted and studied by many of the articles.

Philosophies shape who we are and what we believe to be true. Bui, Quirk, Almazan, and Valenti (2010) quoted research done by Renzaglia, Karvonen, Drasgow & Stoxen in 2003 saying, "Inclusion is a philosophy that urges schools, neighborhoods, and communities to welcome and value everyone, regardless of differences. Central to the philosophy of inclusion are the beliefs that everyone belongs, diversity is valued, and we can all learn from each other" (p. 10). In order to successfully have integration and inclusion in a general education classroom, the teacher and the school leaders must believe that inclusion means all students. Dudley-Marling and Burns (2014) describe two types of ways of thinking about educating students with disabilities. They call one the deficit perspective (or medical model) and other the social constructivist

stance. The deficit perspective sees what deficits children with disabilities have and think about what they can do to speed up the child's learning to get them on track or caught up. If the child is too far behind an educator with the deficit perspective would look at what accommodations or interventions would be successful. Educators with the deficit perspective can often see how excluding students for part of the day to a specialized classroom is appropriate.

The social constructivist sees education as a civil human right for all students and this does not change when a student has a disability. This child still has the right to be educated in the same setting as his or her same age peers. The social constructivist believes that all children regardless of their differences are smart, competent learners. This leads to a different approach to inclusion for students with disabilities (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2010). Some believe the constructivist stance ignores that children have disabilities and are not willing to see that students lack skills. Others disagree stating, "Inclusion is not about disability, nor is it only about schools. Inclusion is about social justice" (Sapon-Shevin, 2003, p. 26). When inclusion is thought of in this way it is the education system that then must look at what it will change in order to best meet every child's needs.

Developing a program philosophy can help programs that are reforming or developing inclusive classrooms. When everyone comes together within the program and shares their thoughts and ideas about inclusion this can help to develop the philosophy. This can also make hiring individuals easier if you have a philosophy for your program. NAEYC and the DEC (2009) recommend that programs need a philosophy on inclusion as part of their broader program mission statement to ensure

that practitioners and staff operate under a similar set of assumptions, values and beliefs about the most effective ways to support infants and young children with disabilities and their families.

Inclusion has been shown to produce positive outcomes for both student with high incidence disabilities (learning disabilities and other “mild” disabilities) and those with low incidence disabilities (intellectual, multiple, and “severe” disabilities) (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010, p. 1). Many of the articles reviewed looked at the positive outcomes of inclusion of special education students. Vakil, Welton, O’Conner and Kline (2009) looked specifically at the inclusion of children with autism in early childhood classrooms. They found that inclusion provides a supportive environment in which young children can grow and learn side by side with their peers. A supportive environment in the early years stimulates learning, and reinforces the synaptic connections, which enhance development (Kline, 2009)). Waldron, Cole, and Majd (2001) investigated the effects of inclusive programs. The study found that 41.7% of student with learning disabilities made progress in math in general education classes compared to 34% in traditional special education settings, without the presence of nondisabled peers (Bui, Quirk, Almazan & Valenti, 2010). There are both academically and socially emotionally benefits for students with special needs that are included in the general education setting. If we accept that children with disabilities will learn from,

The next theme that will be discussed is the impact students, teachers and families have on inclusion as well as the impact that it has on them. The impact on the child with disabilities has already been examined but what about the general education students? This is an aspect of inclusion that is often not discussed. Diamond and

Carpenter (2000) did a study that focused on the outcomes for growth of the typically developing student in the inclusive classroom. The research looked at the social/emotional growth of the students; specifically looked at how much more help students from inclusive settings would offer special needs students compared to students from a setting without children with disabilities. Students from the inclusive setting scored higher. The researchers also looked at prosocial behavior between the two groups as well. Again, children that took part in the inclusion preschool scored higher. This study shows that when children are given opportunities to interact with same age peers with disabilities this can promote an increased awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of others (Diamond & Carpenter, 2000).

Another way that fellow general education students take part in the inclusion process is by being a peer model. The interactions that take place between general education students and students with special needs creates a space for learning. This learning is genuine and is often more successful than that done by a teacher or paraprofessional. Bui, Quirk, Almazan, and Valenti (2010) state that the use of peer mediated instruction and intervention is often cited in the literature as one of the most effective strategies for inclusive classrooms. The research supports that peer instruction and modeling are wonderful for both the typical peer as well as the child with disabilities.

Students are not the only ones that are affected by inclusion, so are the adults. The teachers that are making inclusion happen on an everyday basis are affected as well. Reading through the articles there was a common ideal found that many general education teachers did not want to do inclusion incorrectly. DeVore and Russell (2007)

reported teachers as saying, “Taking the steps towards change was hard, because we did not always know whether what we were doing was right” (p. 194). However as team members recognized each other's' skills, professionals began to create a sense of trust, equality, and team building. Preschool teachers and therapists increasingly shared information in a reciprocal way (DeVore & Russell, 2007)). Statements such as this one show a fear of general education teachers to take the plunge into inclusion. The general education teachers were not alone in their feelings of being unprepared. Smith and Smith (2000) published that in a study done by Cegelka and Doorlag in 1995, special education teachers reported being ill prepared in the key areas often associated with the achievement of successful inclusion. These areas included preparation to work effectively with the core curriculum or the regular education classroom, collaborate with the general education classroom teacher, and manage behavior disruptions in the classroom (Cegelka & Doorlag, 1995).

The literacy and research recommended that teachers collaborate and have discussions about how to best meet the needs of all students in the classroom. Pre-service and in-service opportunities for educators that are in an inclusive setting are recommended. The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms necessitates collaboration between administrators, general educators, special educators, parents and related service providers in order to deliver quality services to all students (Bui, Quirk, Alamazon, & Valenti, 2010). When inclusive practices first start, there are changes in roles. Practices look different since they are all taking place in one setting. “Numerous sophisticated strategies are now available to allow children with a wide range of developmental characteristics to be full partners in

instructional and social activities in typical early childhood programs” (Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, & Connor, 2008, p. 237). This will require more time and energy from the professionals to sit down and discuss how to serve each child and optimize each person’s time in the room. When this happens inclusion in the regular education classroom is a success.

Teachers and students are a large number of the individuals that are affected by inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting but parents also play a role and have an impact on inclusion as well. Parents are often the forgotten piece when thinking about collaboration for a child with special needs. When parent input is not collected educators are not getting a clear picture of a child. The parent has insight into the child that a teacher may not have seen and in the early childhood setting this is even truer. The parent has known the child for longer and has knowledge that is valuable and should be shared with the educator. Vakil, Welton, O’Conner, and Kline (2009) wrote that trust between educators, professionals providing services, and family members is essential to an ethical belief in the process of inclusion. It is vital that early childhood educators build supportive teams with parents and families and are trained and supported in inclusive practices (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997). Professionals that see family members as part of the child’s education team that helps in making decisions will be more successful than professionals that do not.

### **Opposing Viewpoints or Conflicts**

There have been many viewpoints reflected thus far that have supported the idea of inclusion in education but especially in early childhood education. Now the researcher will give viewpoints that do not believe that inclusion is always the answer.

Salend (2011) defines special education and inclusive education and finds that the characteristics and philosophies of special education and inclusion do not mesh and provide alternative approaches to the education of children with special education needs and disabilities (Hornby, 2015). Hornby (2015) goes on to explain that the new definition would have to be established and that we must not think of inclusion as social inclusion but as educational inclusion (p. 238). Since there are many definitions of inclusion this is where the many opposing viewpoints come into play. Many see that if a child is in a school and takes part in the majority of activities with general education peers in the general education setting, than it is inclusion. This is a type of inclusion but is not full inclusion. Hornby (2015) argues that although it is clear that their human rights allow children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) to be educated alongside their mainstream peers, for some of them this may not be the best option. These are opposing viewpoints show that not all professionals think that inclusion is the best option. The researcher wonders if those that are opposed to full inclusion have seen it being implemented successfully to children of varying disabilities. Meeting the needs of children in an inclusive setting may not always be easy and definitely takes time to perfect.

### **Areas for Future Research**

While inclusion is not a new topic, professionals in the education field are always looking to improve. Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, and Conner (2008) wrote an article that looked at if placing a child of preschool age in a full inclusion early childhood program would correlate to that child staying in a full inclusion setting over time. This was a three-year study that looked at how many children remain in the general



education setting as opposed to being pulled to a special education classroom for most of their learning. The authors found that 91% of the children in their study remained in full inclusion or partial inclusion at the end of the study. The reason for moving some to partial inclusion where the majority of the student's day was spent in the general education classroom and they were pulled out for a small portion of the day was not noted (p. 246-247). The teaching profession needs to question what is important. Teachers need to make sure they are doing what is best for students and not what is easiest. Future research should be done to see if the success of full inclusion could last past first and second grade. Do children with disabilities that are included in the general education classroom go on to make greater gains and remain in that inclusive setting?

Inclusion needs further research done that looks at schools that are successfully including children with a variety of disabilities. These schools should be studied to see what they are doing that other schools may not be doing. Gaingreco (2002) suggest we ask ourselves the following:

“How can we successfully include more students with disabilities who are still being educated in unnecessarily restrictive environments such as special education schools and classes?” We know that far too many students are unnecessarily excluded because children with similar characteristics and needs who live in one community are educated in general education classes with supports while in other communities they continue to be sent to special education classes and schools, often without any real consideration being given to general class placement. Being included should not depend on where you live, but currently it does. We need to continually remind ourselves that special

education—namely, especially and individually designed instruction—is a portable service, not a place (p. 79).

Gaingreco (2002) is correct that it should not matter where you live. Teachers and schools in general should want to see all of students achieve and be successful. In order for the future of inclusion to move forward and see more inclusive settings, the teachers, administrators and support staff must all see the benefits and learn more about why inclusion is best for all students.

Support is needed from our national, state and local governments in order to make inclusion happen in all educational systems. In a joint policy statement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education stated (2015) the following:

All children have access to inclusive high-quality early childhood programs, requires strong State and local leadership, a shared responsibility and commitment within communities, and a robust partnership between families, schools, communities, and government at all levels. By striving toward this vision and implementing these recommendations, we can move forward as a country in honoring the rights of all of our youngest children and living up to the American ideal of offering an equal opportunity to all (p. 20).

The above statement as well as the Transition Guide to Postsecondary Education and Employment for Students and Youth with Disabilities put out by the Department of Education (2017) support the inclusion of students now and into their future. The transition guide takes into consideration what help and assistance will be provided to help students as they exit our schools and move on. As a student approaches the time

to leave high school, it is important that preparations for adult life are well underway. For early transition planning and active participation in decision making to occur for students with disabilities, members of the planning team need to be well-informed about the student's abilities, needs, and available services (DOE, 2017). Educators, parents, and our communities can work as partners to insure that all students are included. When inclusion starts in early education it can carry over into elementary, middle school, and high school. When schools have the support of everyone inclusion will become the new norm.

### **Conclusion**

The researching and studying the topic of inclusion in early childhood it was found that many types of inclusion have been used in the education setting. The research that has been done points to full inclusion as a model that is optimal to use with children in the preschool setting and then continued through later years. When fully integrating students into the general education setting a planning team should be developed. Planning team should consist of general education teacher, special education teacher, administrator, the family, and other service providers. The team will work together to develop a plan that will ensure that the student will have their needs meet in every way. Full inclusion allows all aspects of child development to be supported. The child can grow in adaptive skills, self-help skills, social and emotional skills, and academic skills.

Inclusion is set up to promote learning in all developmental areas by providing peer models and work partners that have the skills. This is a component that is not found in a special education classroom or school. Bui, Quirk, Almazan, and Valenti

(2010) found that class-wide peer tutoring models (CWPT) where students serve as tutors and tutees and Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) have both been successful used students with mild disabilities as well as moderate to severe disabilities. An interaction between students with disabilities and their typical peers allows both students to learn. The use CWPT and PALS require the paraprofessional or the teacher to oversee these interactions and assist the peers when needed.

Inclusion is not easy and it takes time and preparation from many individuals. Collaboration is necessary and needs to happen on a daily basis. The team of individuals which could include: general education teacher, special education teacher, family members, and local area education professionals (speech pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, or specialist for autism or other disability) must find time to plan and talk about what the child needs and how those needs will be met. Many professionals find the amount of planning and work to seem overwhelming. Gaingreco (2002) recognized this when he stated the following:

Despite the initial apprehensions of some school staff, once people got to know their new student with disabilities and designed appropriately individualized curriculum and instruction, they usually felt positive about the situation. Equally as important, many teachers came to realize that the steps they had taken to ensure educational integrity and appropriate inclusion of the student with disabilities (e.g., collaborative teamwork, activity-based learning, cooperative experiences, data-based instruction, creative problem solving, peer-to-peer supports) were also applicable for meeting the widely differing educational needs of students without disability labels (p. 78).

Teachers and other educational professionals can find that learning the process of meeting the needs of a student with special needs will help them to better meet the needs of all students they teach.

Inclusion is a topic that is not new to education but needs to be possible thought of differently in many education settings. Educational professionals who include students in every activity by supporting or making accommodations, if needed are making a difference in that child's life. "Ultimately, this job will be easier, approached with greater enthusiasm, and maybe even with a greater sense of urgency, when we demonstrate that we truly value people with disabilities by including them, welcoming them, and helping them learn skills and develop supports that result in meaningful outcomes in their lives" (Giangreco, 2002, p. 2). The end goal should be to prepare students for what lies ahead, what better way, than having them be part of a community. Students can learn what being part of a community is and learn to navigate it. Students who have learned to participate in a community with their peers will have those lessons learned forever.

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